

CHAPLAIN HANDBOOK OF MILITARY FUNERAL PRACTICES

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A Chaplain's Handbook of Military Funeral Practices

INTRODUCTION

The conduct of military funerals is an experience common to all chaplains. Whether at Arlington Cemetery, an ordinary base chapel, a modern suburban parish, or a small church out in the country, our colleagues have distinguished themselves by sensitive, meaningful, and effective pastoral care in countless situations of grief and loss. Ministry to bereaved persons is one of the most stressful, yet rewarding, experiences of ministry. At times of great vulnerability, people have looked to chaplains for comfort, hope, and support. We represent to them a God who cares. We proclaim the healing promises of a faithful God who is there for them. We embody the empathy and concern of the whole religious community which supports them in their hour of need, all in the context of powerful military traditions.

A military funeral has all of the same goals as its civilian counterpart, i.e., to proclaim the victory of faith, to give occasion to pay respect to the deceased, to comfort the family or loved ones, and to serve as a point of remembrance and celebration as the life of the deceased is recalled. The military funeral, however, differs in one critical aspect, in that it takes place within the military community and among military people. As such, it is shaped by the values, needs, and expectations of that community. The risks and challenges of the profession of arms are unique. Because of them, the military funeral serves to honor an individual's contribution to the cause of his or her country, and to pay tribute to that person's courage and selflessness, particularly if death has occurred in the line of duty. By upholding such values in the visibility of a military funeral, the community reinforces the power of these values to order its common life. It may be said that, in a very real sense, every military funeral honors all uniformed men and women.

Marching troops, a bugler, three rifle volleys, are distinctive aspects of a military funeral. Strange or even offensive to some outside the military community, such things are nevertheless critically important to the military funeral and its role among military people. Though these secondary features must take a back seat to the role of religious and spiritual truth in the funeral, they are vital in that they serve to "set apart" the unique vocation of military service from "ordinary" life, and honor the special valor of those who have worn the uniform of their country.

To be sure, the military funeral is far more than the trappings and procedures of the service. Worship, preaching, and pastoral care are all central as we minister to surviving family members and friends of the deceased. Our primary concern must be for the communication of caring, sensitive support. Yet in a community where the proper military decorum is equated with the rendering of respect and honor, it behooves us as chaplains to be fully prepared to conduct military funerals in an orderly and professional way. In short,

we must know what to do, and when and how to do it. Family members, funeral home representatives, and the honor guard, will look to us for expertise and leadership, before, during, and after the funeral. We must be prepared to provide it.

It is obviously not the purpose of this small booklet to be a definitive study of bereavement ministry. A bibliography of references is offered for that purpose, and every chaplain will have resources from his or her own denominational background. Rather, this book seeks simply to be a handy reference guide for the conduct of military funerals and memorial services. All chaplains and enlisted support personnel can benefit from a periodic review of the procedures involved in the variety of services we are called upon to provide.

As you make use of this booklet, may it be in the spirit of true pastoral professionalism, the kind that has always been the hallmark of the Chaplain Service.

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STANDARD HONORS

For most chaplains, the following service will constitute the vast majority of funerals performed.

PRIOR TO THE DAY OF THE SERVICE:

As family and next-of-kin of the deceased are frequently unknown to the chapel staff, the chaplain responsible for the funeral should contact the next-of-kin at the earliest opportunity, and, if possible, arrange to visit them if they live in the chaplain's local area. If they are arriving from out of town, the chaplain should arrange to meet with them as soon after their arrival as possible. This gives the chaplain the opportunity to provide pastoral support, offer condolences, and establish a relationship with the next-of-kin. It also affords the chaplain the opportunity to receive the family's input in planning the funeral service. Favorite hymns, scripture texts, and/or other personal information can be shared with the chaplain at that time, so that the service might be a personalized event in the life of that family. For Roman Catholic funerals, the Wake Service is usually held the day before the funeral itself.

AT THE CHAPEL:

1. Normally, the next-of-kin and friends attending the funeral will have gathered at the chapel (or wherever the service is being held) well before the arrival of the hearse. Take whatever time is available to meet with them, enjoin them in prayer if that seems appropriate, and make sure they are comfortably seated before you proceed to the entrance of the chapel to meet the remains.

2. You should be waiting outside the chapel for the arrival of the hearse (Fig. 2). You should be wearing the service dress uniform with wheel hat, or liturgical vestments, if such is the tradition of your church.

3. When the hearse arrives at the chapel, the Officer-in-charge or the Noncommissioned -Officer-in-charge will give the command of "Attention," followed by the command to "Present Arms." (The reason for the call to attention and presenting of arms is the flag on the remains. In general, we salute a moving flag.) If you are in uniform, come to attention and salute, in accord with the OIC/NCOIC. If in vestments, place your hand over your heart. After the hearse is parked, the OIC/NCOIC will give the command to "Order Arms." The rear door will be opened, and the pallbearers will step forward to remove the casket. At this moment, the OIC/NCOIC will once again give the command to "Present Arms." If you are in uniform, follow the lead of the OIC/NCOIC and salute. If in vestments, again you should place your hand over your heart. Salutes are not rendered inside an Air Force chapel.

4. After the casket is removed from the hearse and positioned to be carried into the chapel, drop your salute (if in uniform), step in front of the casket, and precede it into the chapel (Fig. 3). If honorary pallbearers are utilized, they will form two facing ranks at the entrance to the chapel. A church truck will be waiting in the vestibule. Pass around it and wait for the pallbearers to position the casket on the church truck.

5. When all is in readiness, proceed down the aisle of the chapel. The pallbearers will guide the casket down the aisle, positioning it at the head of the nave. The honorary pallbearers, if utilized, will follow, taking seats in the left front pews, opposite the family (see Fig. 4). For Catholic and Orthodox (and some Protestant) funerals, the Introductory Rites may take place at the door of the chapel, or at the altar. As the procession enters the chapel, instruct the congregation to stand. (It is never appropriate for them to be seated while the U.S. flag passes by.) During the procession, a hymn may be sung, or you may read portions of scripture, if this is consistent with your tradition.

6. After an opening prayer or scripture reading, indicate to the congregation to be seated. The family of the deceased will be seated on your left as you face the congregation. The honorary pallbearers will have taken their place in the front pews to your right. The pallbearers will have exited to the vestibule to await the completion of the service. You then proceed with the service.

7. Upon completion of the service, proceed to the head of the aisle and await the pallbearers, who will guide the casket out of the chapel, turning it first (if necessary) to insure that it leaves the chapel feet-first (Fig. 5). The honorary pallbearers will exit the chapel first, so as to have opportunity to re-form facing ranks outside the chapel entrance, through which the casket will pass. After they have proceeded out (Fig. 6), the chaplain, casket, and pallbearers follow. In Catholic and Orthodox (and some Protestant) funerals, the processional cross or paschal candle leads the procession.

8. In the vestibule, the pallbearers will cover themselves, pick up the casket from the church truck, and follow you to the hearse. If you are in uniform, you should cover yourself at the same time as the pallbearers. Take your position at the far side, rear, of the hearse, as the casket is placed into the hearse. Salute if in uniform, or place your hand over your heart if in vestments.

9. If you choose to wear vestments to the grave site, proceed to the funeral director's car or staff car. If performing the committal service in uniform, return QUICKLY to the vestibule to disrobe, and get your service dress blouse and hat. The funeral director's car will be positioned directly in front of the hearse. Enter the car and ride with the funeral director to the grave site.

10. Be careful to salute whenever passing the hearse, when it contains the flag-draped casket. Remember also to salute the colors (flag) whenever you pass by them.

AT THE GRAVE SITE:

1. At the grave site, the funeral director will show you where to stand. You should take up a position adjacent to the spot the hearse will stop when it arrives. Stand to one side, in close proximity to the OIC/NCOIC. Remain in position until the family and friends have likewise arrived and departed their vehicles. (Before the family arrives, you should determine from the funeral director or the pallbearers which end is the head of the grave, which is the place you will stand while conducting the committal service.)

2. When family and friends are ready to proceed to the grave site, the funeral director will advise the OIC/NCOIC that all is in readiness. The OIC/NCOIC will then give the command, "Secure the Casket." If you are in uniform, you should salute while the casket is removed from the hearse and turned toward the grave. If in vestments, place your hand over your heart. You will then drop your salute and precede the pallbearers to the grave. The honorary pallbearers (if present) will form two ranks, through which you and the casket will pass (see Fig. 7). After you have passed through their ranks, the honorary pallbearers will form a single line behind you (Fig. 8).

3. Take your position at the head of the grave (Fig. 8), as advised by the funeral director or pallbearers. Make sure the pallbearers have sufficient space to pass you if you are positioned between the grave and hearse (Fig. 8). The pallbearers will then place the casket on the lowering device. As the casket passes, you will present arms again. Hold the salute while the casket is placed upon the lowering device. Drop your salute in concert with the OIC/NCOIC standing at the foot of the grave, or when the flag has been pulled taut over the casket and there is no one saluting at the foot of the grave.

4. Survey the situation to insure that all family and friends have drawn close to the grave. Normally, the funeral director will advise you to begin the committal service at this point. You may wish to remove your hat before you begin. If you choose to wear a stole over your military uniform, it should be put on at this point.

5. After the service is completed, replace your hat (if you chose to remove it), remove your stole (if in uniform), take two steps back from the grave, and salute (or place your hand over your heart if vested). Your stepping back indicates to the OIC/NCOIC that the service is complete, and that the firing party may proceed with the firing of volleys and the blowing of TAPS. Hold your salute until TAPS is completed and the command "Order Arms" is given. Continue to stand at attention.

6. At this time, the pallbearers will fold the flag. It will be passed down toward you along one side of the grave, and the NCOIC or Airman-in-charge will check the flag fold, then give the flag to you. Stand at attention while the fold is checked. It is appropriate to reach for and receive the flag with left hand on top and right hand underneath. (Make sure you have both hands free to do this.) Normally, the point of the folded flag will be towards you, the chaplain. Take the flag, hold it with due respect, wait for the NCOIC/MC to resume his place, and then proceed to the next-of-kin. In presenting the flag to the next-of-kin, insure that the long, straight side is closest to him/her.

7. There is no "script" or mandatory language involved in the passing of the flag to the next-of-kin. However, the regulation (AFR 143-1) suggests that some expression of gratitude and condolence be made on behalf of the government, such as "This flag is offered by a grateful nation in memory of the faithful service performed by your loved one." It is good pastoral practice to personalize your remarks by the inclusion of the name and relationship of the individual being honored. The precise nature of the exchange is left to the pastoral sensitivity and good judgment of the chaplain and the unique circumstances of the occasion. In any event, the chaplain's statements should be brief, pastoral, and courteous.

8. After the presentation, and if you are in uniform, you may come to attention and salute the flag, as a gesture of respect. This is optional. At this time, the chaplain may wish to present any special guests or senior leaders/dignitaries to the next-of-kin, if it seems appropriate.

9. At this time, the funeral director will announce to all that the service is concluded, and that they should return to their transportation. You may, if desired, accompany the next-of-kin to his or her vehicle, and make whatever offers of future follow-up care and support seem appropriate.

10. The service is now complete. You may wish to remain until the next-of-kin vehicle departs. Return to the chapel in the funeral director's car.

AFTER THE FUNERAL:

A note written to the family about two weeks after the funeral will be most appreciated. If the family resides in the local area, a follow-up visit several months after the funeral will be helpful in expressing pastoral concern, and in determining how the family is adjusting.

SPECIAL NOTES:

Places to go for additional information:

1. AFR 143-1, Chapter 16, "Military Honors and Conduct of Funerals."
2. Air Force chaplains at Arlington National Cemetery (DSN 225-4584 **or** commercial 703-695-4584).
3. The USAF Chaplain Service Institute (*DSN 493-2821 or commercial 334-953-2821*).
4. Personal Affairs or Mortuary Affairs personnel at your base.

FULL HONORS

The Complete Military Funeral

Insofar as the chaplain is concerned, the Full Honors, or Complete Military Funeral differs only slightly from the service just described under "Standard Honors." According to AFR 143-1, Section F, paragraph 16-11, "the complete Air Force funeral is conducted when all of the required persons and equipment are available, and when desired by the family of the deceased." The chief differences are:

1. The complete funeral includes a procession on foot to the grave site (Fig. 9). If circumstances dictate, members of the procession may ride in vehicles, or the procession may be eliminated if the burial site is adjacent to the chapel.

2. The funeral party will include a Troop Escort, consisting of a number of troops suitable to the rank of the deceased (see AFR 143-1, para 16-2).

3. A military band will be utilized to provide music before the casket is removed from the hearse, once at the chapel, and again at the grave site. The chaplain should find out what music is planned, and make sure it is appropriate (hymns or hymn-like patriotic tunes only) to the setting. The band will also provide music during the procession to the grave site. If the funeral is for a General/Flag officer, there are specified occasions when "Ruffles and Flourishes" are played. The chaplain should know exactly when this will happen, so that he/she can be prepared, standing at attention and saluting.

4. If the procession is on foot, the chaplain is positioned immediately behind the Color Guard, and before the hearse bearing the remains. If circumstances dictate a procession by motor vehicle, the chaplain will ride with the funeral director, whose car should be immediately behind the pallbearers, and before the hearse. A good rule of thumb is that the chaplain always immediately precedes the remains.

SERVICE FOR CREMAINS

When honors are rendered for cremains (ashes), the chapel service, procession to the grave, and graveside service will be conducted in similar fashion to the complete and standard funeral.

AT THE CHAPEL:

1. The chaplain and pallbearers will be positioned outside the chapel, awaiting the vehicle conveying the urn and flag bearer.

2. When the vehicle arrives, the group should come to attention and salute. You should salute if in uniform. You then lead the procession into the chapel. The urn bearer carries the urn into the chapel. The leading flag bearer marches abreast of and to the right of the urn bearer, and carries the folded flag. The other flag bearers march in columns of two behind the urn bearer and leading flag bearer.

3. Inside the chapel, the urn should be placed on a small stand or table in front of the chancel, with the folded flag beside it. The urn bearer and flag bearers will then take their seats in the left front pew of the chapel (your right), opposite the family. You will now conduct the formal service.

4. After you have completed the service, you will lead the procession out of the chapel. The urn bearer and flag bearers will escort the cremains and flag out of the chapel.

5. Before proceeding out of the chapel to the funeral coach, the bearers will cover themselves. You should do the same if in uniform. If you have conducted the service in vestments but plan to perform the graveside service in uniform, change quickly to avoid delaying the procession.

6. Procession to the grave site is according to the same procedures which apply to other funerals.

AT THE GRAVE SITE:

1. You and the flag bearers will await the vehicle conveying the urn. When the vehicle arrives, all come to attention and salute. Upon signal from the funeral director, you will lead the procession to the grave site and take your position at the head of the grave. (See page 5, paragraph 1.) When the urn bearer has placed the urn on the lowering device, he or she then joins the flag bearers in unfolding the flag. **DO NOT BEGIN THE SERVICE UNTIL THE FLAG IS UNFOLDED BY THE FLAG BEARERS AND HELD IN POSITION, WAIST HIGH, ABOVE THE URN. THIS IS YOUR SIGNAL TO BEGIN THE COMMITTAL SERVICE.**

2. For directions regarding the committal service, see paragraphs four and five under *Standard Honors*.

3. After the committal service, the flag is refolded for presentation to the next-of-kin. The chaplain will present the flag in the same manner prescribed for other funerals. See paragraphs six through ten under *Standard Honors* for directions.

MEMORIAL SERVICE

A memorial service may be conducted if remains have not been recovered, or where the funeral service will be conducted in another geographical location from the unit of assignment or place of residence. In the latter case, the memorial service affords the local community, including colleagues and/or friends of the deceased, the opportunity to pay their respects. In such cases, the request for a memorial service should come from the unit to which the member was assigned, or from members of the family of the deceased.

A chapel memorial service may be conducted with the following personnel:

- a. Chaplain
- b. Flag bearer
- c. Color Guard
- d. Bugler
- e. Firing Party (if graveside service is used)
- f. OIC/NCOIC

AT THE CHAPEL:

1. The chaplain, flag bearer (carrying a folded flag), and color guard move down the aisle of the chapel in that order. Upon reaching the chancel, the flag bearer places the flag on the table or stand provided for that purpose. You, the chaplain, should go immediately to the pulpit or to the altar, according to liturgical specifications.

2. After placing the flag on the stand, the flag bearer will move smartly to the side or rear of the chapel. Two members of the color guard (the U.S. flag bearer and one guard) proceed to the right side of the chapel, while the other two members (the Air Force flag bearer and other guard) move to the left side. Both pairs come to a position facing the center aisle. When the color guard is in place, the service may begin.

3. At the conclusion of the service, you should step forward and lift the folded flag from the table. At this time, the Air Force flag is dipped in salute, and the two members of the color guard render a hand salute. The bugler positioned just outside the chapel now plays TAPS.

4. At the conclusion of TAPS, you should present the flag to the next-of-kin, or to another predetermined person, who will present it to the next-of-kin. After the presentation, take a position by the pulpit, or other suitable place in the chancel where you will not interfere with the color guard's movement.

5. When you have taken your place, the two elements of the color guard will move from their positions toward the center aisle. Upon converging, the U.S. flag should be on the right, with the Air Force flag to its left. The color guard moves down the aisle and out of the chapel, with you, the chaplain, following. (Note: this is one occasion when you do not lead a procession.) The service is now concluded.

AT THE GRAVE SITE:

(Note: this is a separate service, not done in conjunction with a chapel service.

1. At the grave site, the firing party, bugler, OIC/NCOIC, and flag bearer take their positions as defined in AFR 143-1, 16-22. The flag bearer, holding the folded flag, stands facing the table provided for the placement of the flag.

2. When the family arrives at the grave site, the flag bearer places the flag on the table, and steps back to a position of attention. You should escort the family to the grave site. Remember to salute the flag when you pass it.

3. Before beginning the service, you may remove your hat, if you are in uniform. You may also place a stole around your shoulders for the duration of the committal service. (See page 5, paragraph 4.) You should stand near the table with the flag on it, and close by the family, too, if possible.

4. After completing the service, replace your hat (if you chose to remove it), remove the optional stole, and take two steps back. This will indicate completion of the service. The firing of volleys and TAPS will follow. You should salute during the playing of TAPS, if in uniform. (See page 5, paragraph 5.)

5. After TAPS, the flag bearer will pick up the folded flag and present it to the next-of-kin-kin, or other predetermined person who will give it to the next-of-kin. This concludes the service.

RESOURCE BIBLIOGRAPHY

The chaplain's primary tools for bereavement ministry are, of course, to be found in the assurances of sacred scripture. In addition, the worship books and hymnals of most denominations and faith groups provide appropriate words and scripture passages to comfort the grieving. As ordained clergy, all chaplains will be aware of such resources from their own traditions.

Nevertheless, the collegial style of Chaplain Service ministry leads naturally to opportunities for us to learn and grow from one another, and to be enriched by other traditions. The following brief bibliography, by no means exhaustive, draws from many parts of the Judeo-Christian community in an effort to enrich the practice of our ministries, and broaden our understanding of pastoral practice with bereaved persons.

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The following Scriptographic booklets may also be useful to your ministry with bereaved persons.

About Suicide

What Every Christian Should Know About Grief

Facing Death as a Christian

About Depression

About Suicide Among Young People

These booklets are available from the Channing L. Bete Co. Write for a catalog to 200 State Rd., South Deerfield, MA 01373-0200, or call 1-800-628-7733.